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Gazrpom as an Energy Weapon. Perception of Threats to Energy Security of the EU

The article is written within the constructivist approach and focuses on the perception of Gazprom in Western academic and expert community as a source of threats to the EU's energy security. The review of works by European and American researchers, published from 2009 to 2015, shows that the list of perceived threats is significantly wider than the one usually mentioned by Russian authors. As a result a gap arises between the concerns that are expressed by Western academic and expert community, and the explanatory model that is suggested in Russian works. Described differences require, firstly, greater attention to carrying out explanatory work on the corporate level and, secondly, resolution of the dilemma of using state-owned companies as a policy tool on the state level.

Key words: energy security, energy weapon, Gazprom, constructivism, perception, academic and expert community.

It is well known that energy trade between Russia and the EU plays a crucial role for both parties. At the same time the parties often have different approaches on how to evaluate current patterns of their cooperation and on what principles it should be based in the future. These differences bring about disputes and uncertainty on further perspectives of Russian-European energy cooperation. Tough negotiations on proposed gas transit routes, South Stream and Nord Stream-2 as well as debate about Gazprom activity in the EU, which led to the European Commission investigation, are recent examples of the clash of approaches.

Russian and Western (and the latter covers European countries and the US in this paper) academic literature and expert analysis provide various explanations as to why energy trade has become such a topical issue in given bilateral relations. The dominant explanation rests on neorealist assumptions, focusing on competition among involved actors, which are mostly states and supranational institutions such as the European Commission, and the interest to enhance their political and economic power. There is a major difference between most common Russian and Western interpretations regarding which party bears greater responsibility for instability in cooperation. Obviously, these variations are usually closely connected with scholars' origin and location. A common approach for Russian scientific and expert discourse usually attributes Russian-European gas energy disputes to the involvement of the European Commission, the US and transit countries. This explanatory model makes the following assertions:

Firstly, it emphasizes the linkage of energy security threats and conflicts with the activity of the European Commission. Brussels bureaucracy is thought to strive for "getting rid of equal mutual dependency of Russia and the EU"[1]. Security of supply can be seen to be under threat due to unreasonable European energy policy[2].

Secondly, attention is paid to the role of the US, which tries to drive a wedge between two partners by acting through the European Commission[3].

Thirdly, opposition from transit states to new supply routes, for instance from Poland and Baltic states to the construction of Nord Stream, is seen as being caused by fear of losing their transit role, and as a result, transit fees and political influence.

Finally, fears of ordinary European citizens are explained by supply interruptions in 2006 and 2009[4].

This point of view is rather different from Western approaches. Russian energy policy is often criticized as inappropriate in terms of American and European legal or ideational standards. This faultiness is expressed within an "energy weapon" concept and closely connected with Gazprom activity. One of the important topics of the discussion is a role that Gazprom plays for energy security of European countries. Topicality of this discussion and the fact that it is not restricted only within academic and expert discourse became evident during an investigation launched by the European Commission on Gazprom activity.

Methodology, research issue

Constructivism is another significant methodology employed for shedding light on energy disputes. The authors involved focus on the difference in values and culture as a nature of misunderstanding between the parties. Issues of legal investigation, viewed as a means of political pressure, and the creation of new transit pipelines based on geopolitical locations can be typical situations for state interactions from a realist standpoint. However from constructivist perspective, the above mentioned issues cannot be taken for granted. To constructivists, the disputes are seen as stemming from the difference of interpretations, since the reality is "a product of our perceptions, values, ideas, practices and material factors..."[5]. If the differences in counterparts' positions are clear, hope rises that disputes will be overcome. This is why it seems to be of great importance to have closer look on the perception of energy security issues in Europe.

The scope of this paper is set by the following framework. It rests on the constructivist approach and focuses on the perception of Gazprom threats instead of the analysis of their reasonableness. It is not intended to find out which party explains current issues in a more precise way, since constructivists view perception as a more important factor than statistical data.

The author meant to limit the issue of perception by academic literature and research as a primary source of information in order to separate it from mass-media commentaries. There is a major difference in explanatory power of the above mentioned sources of information, since the latter is often used for public policy objectives. The range of papers written by scholars and experts is also narrowed by two additional considerations. Firstly, from a methodological point of view, the problem of "energy weapon" mostly lays in neorealist literature. Secondly, the range of employed sources is limited by a temporal frame (2009–2015). The starting point is chosen due to gas supply disruption in 2009 that affected the EU countries. From the author's point of view, this disruption led to a wide usage of the term "energy weapon" (which was used for Russia in 2006 for the first time) regarding Gazprom in Western academic and expert literature. The final year is defined by the available literature present when the paper was written.

This paper focuses on Gazprom activity on the European market as one of the major actors in Russian-European natural gas trade. It is devoted to the perception of Russian company as a source of threats to the EU and European countries. This paper has the following major goals:

Firstly, it is meant to identify available explanations as to why Gazprom is able to act as an energy weapon and what conditions are deemed necessary for the company to be a foreign energy policy tool;

Secondly, it is aimed to give an overview of the threats Gazprom is seen to pose to the EU and find out what instruments and methods are considered unacceptable.

While trying to create a general picture of Gazprom as a foreign energy policy tool, we take into consideration that the perception of Gazprom as a foreign policy tool differs within the academic community dealing with Russian-European gas relations. Scholars stem from different countries and regions of the world, and therefore, views expressed in academic papers reflect ideas integral to various political agenda, national security perceptions and cultures on the whole. However, in this paper I would rather not differentiate academic views in accordance with scholars' origin in order to create a general picture of Gazprom as an energy policy tool. Therefore, I don't separate academic scholars based on European countries and the US, and instead, refer to them as the "Western" approach, as distinct from Russian views.

How can European energy security be affected by Russia or Gazprom?

Academic literature and expert analysis that focus on energy security in Europe provide plenty of examples demonstrating that energy or, more precisely, Gazprom is perceived as a foreign policy tool or weapon of Kremlin. Examples include:

"Kremlin... has shown no compunction in using energy as a geopolitical weapon"[6];

Gazprom "...acts as an arm of Russian foreign policy. Russia does exploit its energy card in order to serve wider foreign policy goals"[7];

"Moscow has already proved that it is willing to... use energy as a foreign policy tool"[8];

"The Russian Federation sees benefits in a destabilized Europe. This may take the form of "soft" leverage – low gas prices for those who take a pro-Kremlin line, while squeezing those states it finds less amenable"[9];

"It is in the dependence of some of its member states on Russian pipeline gas that constitutes the EU's most acute vulnerability"[10].

The paper will go into detail over various allegations against Gazprom, available in Western academic literature so that they are structured in accordance with the following logic:

1. Preconditions for exercising power;
2. Methods;
3. Aims.

Preconditions for Gazprom power: internal and external

Much attention is paid to why Gazprom is able to act as an energy weapon. Ability of the company to exercise power on the European market is believed to stem from various preconditions. We can divide them into two groups. One of them covers preconditions that are external to Europe. They include the advantages of Gazprom itself. Usually these arguments cover economic powers, ability due to monopolization to represent the whole Russian export to Europe, and political ones – tight relations of Gazprom management with state authorities. Political advantages of Gazprom being a national energy company are underlined in a number of papers. Usually the authors emphasize the following facts, explaining or illustrating close ties between the company and the government.

1. The Russian state is very interested in supporting Gazprom business activity due to large financial earnings for the budget (8% of GDP[11]),

2. There are close ties between the Gazprom management and the Russian government with top management positions serving as a "revolving door"[12].

In this connection I would like to mention the energy weapon model proposed by Karen Smith Stegen, which allows one to "analyze the capacity of any supplier to convert its energy resources into political power"[13]. In accordance with this model, a few required steps were accomplished by Russia that allowed the conversion of energy capital into political power. The author pointed out that the state has already managed to consolidate resources and take control over transit routes. Gazprom is taken as an example of successful consolidation of the gas energy sector. A few components of this model, such as consolidation of resources and energy routes, are in focus of other papers as well[14].

Another group of factors providing Gazprom with power is thought to be preconditions internal to Europe, i.e. weaknesses of the European market. They can also be structured as political and economic components. Political weaknesses are considered by some as absence of common energy policy[15] or "weak, disunited... action in face of Russian coercion"[16]. Economic issues are connected with insufficient diversification of supplies and market development issues, including low level of hub activity and the absence of a wide network of transport infrastructure. These economic issues usually concern weak interconnections of Central and Eastern European countries.

Preconditions for Gazprom power		
	Internal to Europe (weaknesses of European market)	External to Europe (strengths of Gazprom itself)
political	absence of common foreign policy	tight relations of Gazprom management with state authorities
economic	market development (low level of hub activity), absence of transport infrastructure, insufficient diversification of suppliers	ability to represent the whole Russian export to Europe due to monopolization

Presumed instruments and methods

Gazprom is thought to employ specific instruments that are not used by typical enterprises in energy sector. I would like to make a short overview to demonstrate a toolbox that covers a whole range of economic and non-economic methods available in Western academic literature. Economic instruments represent Gazprom's ability to change the price or keep it on the desired level via contract conditions. Firstly, they are connected with Gazprom's adherence to the traditional model of the gas market. This model is based on Groningen netback pricing system and is notable for long-term contracts, destination clauses, take-or-pay obligation and indexation to the cost of alternative non-gas fuels, which is usually oil-indexation. Initially, this model was created to satisfy the interests of both producers and consumers, and it did so, however later the situation changed. After the dissolution of the Soviet bloc its former members had to negotiate supply contract conditions with independent Russia.

The traditional gas market model is thought to provide advantages for the dominant party in such a situation. Filip Černoch argues that "LTC indexed to the costs of alternative non-gas fuels and destination clauses enabled Gazprom to charge different markets with different prices. That enables company to extract not only economical but also political gains linking the prices and condition of contracts with economical and political concessions"[17]. A separation effect of the traditional model is highlighted by Gal Luft and Anne Korin too, where "Moscow prefers to deal with the EU member states separately rather than as a group. This way it can price discriminate among its customers, charging each country as close to its full paying potential as possible"[18].

It is crucial that supplier's ability to change the price can lead not only to price increase but to its decrease as well, i. e. the provision of subsidies. Within the scope of the energy weaponry discussion the fact of subsidies raises the question of conditions, on which subsidies were provided. The variety of views on subsidies is quite indicative. Agnia Grigas pointed out to the case of Baltic states that demonstrated high topicality of "unfair pricing" issue during the recent years. The scholar argues that "the fact that Baltic states continued to benefit from concessionary gas prices for nearly 17 years after independence, even as EU member states, clearly challenges the widespread Baltic perception of price discrimination"[19]. However, there is another perspective expressed by Newnham. From his point of view, subsidized prices generally prove that states passed under control of energy-exporter[20], and so the fear arises that policy making in those states might be constrained as a result. Newnham suggests that oil and gas profits can be used as carrots in order to "reward (allied states) with ample amounts of subsidized energy", "support... pro-Russian enclaves in less compliant states", "bribe individuals and corporations", "win over politically important individuals" or as sticks in the form of "punitive price increases and demands for debt payment"[21]. At the same time, the author considers the reduction of subsidies to be a means of undermining the credibility of economic reforms and wealth of Western allies. "The Ukrainian economy has suffered a real drain thanks to Gazprom... the Ukraine's economic problems have imposed a political cost on Yuschenko and his pro-Western allies, weakening both political support and their ability to implement their campaign promises. Every Ukrainian hryvnia sent to Moscow for gas is one that cannot be spent on popular programs such as health, education or public works"[22]. This is a good example of introducing a purely normative approach into international energy studies. Overall, the discussion on subsidies demonstrates that if fears of energy weapon exist, any price deviation from the gas hub level may be seen as a proof of pressure or backstage deals.

A few basic elements of the traditional gas market model turned out to be in focus of attention during the EC investigation. In 2015, the EC sent a Statement of Objection to Gazprom, alleging that the Russian company may be abusing EU antitrust rules by employing destination clauses, carrying out unfair pricing policy and linking natural gas sales with infrastructure commitments[23]. The investigation did not initially result in any legally binding commitments for Gazprom, but it did question the compliance of Gazprom contracts with the EU anticompetitive law. It proved that Gazprom's adherence to traditional gas market practices is now encountering opposition not only within the academic community but also on the very top EU level. The EU investigation is likely to be one of the major reasons behind numerous revisions of gas supply contracts between Gazprom and its customers in Europe[24].

The infrastructure commitments mentioned above concern Russian export pipelines, but an issue of infrastructure assets is much broader. Some fear that Gazprom can not only affect prices to manage its export pipelines, but that it can also misuse its control over supply infrastructure to affect prices. “Russia’s increasingly assertive policy has prompted concern... that Russia will exploit existing debts for energy supplies or other economic weakness in energy consuming countries to... buy or take over assets in those countries’ energy sectors or other sectors, with a view to use those assets for political leverage”[25].

A non-economic toolbox includes instruments that affect the access to natural gas resources, as opposed to its price. One example of this is supply interruptions. Robert Orttung and Indra Overland mention pipeline shutoffs and explosions as a means of putting pressure on customers[26]. Indeed there are few cases of shutoffs and no cases of explosions when Russian involvement was proved. This is often mentioned in Russian academic literature and expert analysis. However Russian ability to cut off supply brings about «...fears that freedom of action in foreign and security policies will be constrained, particularly for European countries which are wholly or largely dependent on Russian gas; and that these countries may not support general European policies in relation to Russia, or be unable to resist Russian political and economic initiatives, because of their gas dependence”[27].

Secondly, the Russian activity against European diversification policy is thought to be the threat to European gas energy security within an accessibility dimension. “...Russia pushes to maintain control over energy transportation routes and opposes any projects that could provide Europe with alternative energy supplies”[28]. Gal Luft and Anne Korin express similar concerns that “the second prong of Russia’s strategy is to lock in supply by consolidating control over strategic energy infrastructure throughout Europe and Eurasia”[29]. Consolidation of supply routes from the Western perspective leads to dominant position in the market and eventually strengthens negotiation position of the party during negotiation process. The fear is caused by “...potential abuse of this dominance, whether motivated economically or politically. This abuse could have a form of company excluding rivals (foreclosuring) or directly harming consumers (their exploitation, for example by raising the prices)”[30]. Here one can see that dominance in the market has a twofold nature and can be considered as both an instrument and an aim. Except for the consequences, which Federico pointed out, dominance can be seen as political and economic capital that consequently guarantees political and economic gains in the future. This is why Russian argument claiming its complete reliability as a natural gas supplier does not avert the process of diversification on the European gas market.

Presumed Gazprom aims

There are two different perspectives on Gazprom. On the one hand, it is a commercial entity, and as such, is expected to strive to increase profit. Economic gain is an integral objective for any commercial enterprise, and it can bring about fears only in the case of a company's dominant position in the market. On the other hand, Gazprom is closely connected with the Russian state, and therefore, it is perceived as providing opportunities to attain certain political goals. Political goals are usually seen as to attain political concessions by exerting power on government institution, with an objective to undermine EU energy policy or make a European state carry out a more friendly policy towards Gazprom.

Agnia Grigas provides a detailed example as to how Gazprom was brought into court for allegations of increasing prices, presumably as a way to apply political pressure. "These claims most likely resulted from statements in 2010 and 2011 by Gazprom and Lietuvos Dujos, suggesting that Lithuania was charged higher gas prices than Latvia and Estonia because Vilnius sought to implement the EU's Third Directive while Tallin and Riga had opted for less stringent "unbundling" policies and to delay them until 2014"[31].

Academic and research papers on Russian-European gas energy relations written by Russian authors often comprise two following ideas. Firstly, the reliability of Russian energy supply to Europe is taken for granted. The idea that "Russia... regularly supplied energy sources during many decades that didn't depend on political and ideological factors of the Cold war and proved its reliability by meeting all its commitments" [32] is often used in one way or another to prove security of Russian energy supply. Secondly, complications of energy trade are ascribed to the activity of transit countries, the US or the EC that are not interested in strengthening Russian-European cooperation. The conclusion drawn from the above mentioned assertions calls forth deliverance from transit dependency and implementation of different policies for the EU members. One of the policies should be bilateral cooperation with pragmatic member-states that are interested in close collaboration. Another is oriented towards those that are not interested. Possible solutions to calm down fears seem to be assurances of unacceptability of politically motivated supply cuts and construction of supply routes that bypass transit countries.

These ideas were carried out successfully, as seen by the construction of the Nord Stream pipeline, for instance. However, the process of South Stream project implementation has confirmed the necessity to pay greater attention to the situation in the whole EU. The problem identified in this paper is that the fear of unexpected supply cuts is not the central one for Gazprom perception in Europe. The list of threats associated with Gazprom activity is much broader, and supply short-cuts in 2006 and 2009 should not be considered the main cause. There are a number of factors as to why Gazprom is being perceived as a Russian energy weapon. Firstly, as the paper explains, the Russian company is described by European authors to be very powerful. It has the potential to put pressure on its customers due to a number of preconditions, which can be divided into internal and external groups. Preconditions external to the European gas market are Gazprom's monopoly on gas export to Europe via pipelines and its close relations with Russian authorities. Whereas internal preconditions are European gas market weaknesses, which are considered to be absence of common foreign energy policy and the low development of gas market mechanisms. Secondly, Gazprom is considered to resort to a number of economic and non-economic instruments allowing the company to convert its power into favorable conditions of contracts or political concessions. Gazprom tries to keep long-term contracts, destination clauses, take-or-pay obligations and indexation to the cost of alternative fuel. The Russian monopoly is thought to reach and preserve its dominant position by acquiring infrastructure assets, promoting new export pipeline routes and hindering competing projects. Some scholars mention supply shutoffs as an asset at Gazprom's disposal. Thirdly, Gazprom is seen to be an instrument of Russian foreign policy, since it presumably seeks political goals of the Russian state in addition to its own commercial ones. It should be noted that Gazprom's activity outside the EU is not distinctly separated from its activity in the EU. Therefore, when the company's toolbox is employed in different spatial and temporal conditions, the resulting impact can alter and influence Europeans' perception as well.

Obviously, the academic and expert community is not unanimous. There are scholars who question Gazprom's ability to influence significantly political decisions in the EU countries. However, the important fact is that the idea of Gazprom as an energy weapon is not just a fuzzy concept used for political purposes. This view is widely spread in Western academic and expert discourse. Preconditions for Gazprom's power, its toolbox and aims as an instrument of Russian foreign policy are theoretically explained and grounded. This promotes a negative perception of Gazprom in Europe and unfavorably affects the implementation of its projects. It is a difficult task to prove or refute that political pressure was truly used by Gazprom to achieve its goals, because price mechanisms of contracts contain a number of various conditions and are classified. Referring back to the mentioned conditions, any conflict between Gazprom and its customers or transit partners can negatively influence customer's decision making and public opinion. Therefore, the issue of company's public image gains in importance and requires more efficient explanatory work to carry Gazprom's view to academic and expert energy discourse. The complications encountered by Gazprom should be taken into consideration by other Russian companies, such as Rosneft and Novatek that will be able to open up the European LNG market in the near future.

In regards to the state level, Russian energy policy is likely to be inefficient in the future if it is oriented on bilateral cooperation. This is a result of enhanced mechanisms implemented in the European gas energy market and the growing role of the EC in market regulation. Close cooperation with a few pragmatic EU member-states will no longer be sufficient to put bilateral projects into practice. Therefore the relations with the whole EU and the EC need to be revised. Taking into account that the European energy market is shifting towards a "buyer's market", Russia is facing a dilemma whether it should keep using state energy corporations to promote the state's goals or if it should preserve its share.

The important divergence between Russian and Western views on Gazprom's activity demonstrated in the paper calls forth further research on the reasons as to why the "energy weapon" concept has been applied to the Russian company. Statistical analysis of Gazprom's prices to prove or refute pressure on customers is complicated due to the lack of reliable data. Therefore, the application of the Copenhagen school approach appears logical and promising. It can be oriented towards the securitization of Gazprom issue in Europe and can expose the interests of European actors to create a negative perception of the Russian company.

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